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In Need of Nature's Nourishment

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A close analysis of nature imagery within Toni Morrison's two works, Love and Sula, reveals the types of connections this august writer creates between the natural sphere and the human realm. Such a comparative study of these two works is fitting because it sheds light on the larger context in which naturalized human love is placed and creatively celebrated in both an early and late Morrison novel. In particular, examining nature imagery divulges that both Heed and Christine's and Nel and Sula's innate friendships seems to represent a natural force. We see that Morrison personifies trees and water in order to merge the characters of Shadrack and L with their surrounding environment. Conversely, she tropes the characters of Nel, Sula, Heed, Christine, May and Junior as animals to further blur lines between separate human and natural identities. It is noteworthy that in these two specific novels, creatures and living, growing earthen forces serve to both reflect and provoke certain character's actions. Characters who are sensitive to nature experience both self- discovery and self-affirmation. In both of these works, Morrison is able to unseat certain gender stereotypes from both characters' and readers' minds.

One of my main literary observations is that Morrison uses nature imagery as an instructional device for the reader as well as for the characters in the novels. She hopes that the reader can find connection with nature while digesting her words, learning the same lessons about self-formation and self-worth. Just as nature helps to heal and birth self-knowledge within her characters, she hopes it will bring about similar revelation

within the self-conscious reader. Nature imagery is a gift Morrison uses to nourish all literary participants.

In the research I have conducted, no other Morrison critic has proposed and/or sufficiently discussed the theoretical assumption that a close reading of nature imagery in relation to self-knowledge, gender and central friendships would uncover underlying systems of thought that are otherwise unavailable to the reader. For instance, in a book that documents over 24 interviews with Toni Morrison over the past 30 years, only one conversation contains a question specifically related to her use of "nature spirits".[1] Unfortunately, after this thread of discussion is answered by Morrison in one terse response, the interviewer, Charles Ruas, moves back to a question about "circular construction" in her novels.[2] Sadly, the importance of nature imagery is underrated.

In other works, like Kathleen R. Wallace's and Karla Armbruster's essay entitled, "The Novels of Toni Morrison: 'Wild Wilderness Where There Was None' ", nature is represented in a discussion about environmentalism and the need for human's to respect the earth. However, although these writers view nature to be an integral character in Morrison's novels, they do not elaborate upon my idea that other characters as well as the reader learn and experience positive growth due to natural elements.[3] These critics do not theorize about how Morrison connects nature specifically to the social constructions of gender and platonic, human relationships.

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[1] Toni Morrison, interview by Charles Ruas, Conversations with Toni Morrison, 1981, 100.
[2] Ruas, 101.
[3] Kathleen R. Wallace and Karla Armbruster, "The Novels of Toni Morrison: 'Wild Wilderness Where there Was None' " in Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocentrism (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001) 213.

In both Love, Morrison's most recent publication in 2003, and Sula, completed thirty years earlier in 1973, nature imagery plays a dominant role. Trees become so personified in each of these novels that they seem to transform into actualized characters that help to convey the emotional sentiments that human beings are experiencing. For example, as Shadrack leaves the insane asylum at the beginning of Sula, he is terrified of what the future will bring and he therefore imagines that "trees tossing (their heads) ruefully" mean to attack him.[4] His sole consolation is that the trees are rooted to the ground and therefore can only wag their leaves with discontent (S 11). Because Shadrack himself is experiencing fear, he makes the outside world the offender and he does not distinguish between human and natural form. These are of equal value from his point of view.

In Love, a young Junior tries desperately to escape on foot from a "truckful of uncles" who wish to terrorize her.[5] She desperately seeks refuge in a thick forest, and consequently imagines maple trees as human muscle men "boasting six and seven trunk-size arms" who can protect her from the lecherous lust of the men who pursue her. The reader experiences Junior's anxiety because Morrison describes only a handful of the trees as strong, healthy bodyguards. The rest of the locusts, ash, white cedar and butternut breeds are like sick humans, "coronary victims" of "black cauliflowers of disease" (L 58). Junior must dodge around the "cracked" corpses of these trees and she

[4] Toni Morrison, Sula (New York: 1st Plume Books ed., 1982) 11. Further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically as S within the text.
[5] Toni Morrison, Love (New York: 1st Alfred A. Knopf ed., 2003) 58. Further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically as L within the text.

cannot hope for any salvation from their "copper and gold" bleeding bodies (L 58). In a way, these trees foreshadow Junior's fate if she is forced to submit to the uncle's attack. She recognizes these trees to represent a type of human suffering and death she wishes to avoid. Interestingly enough, these lifeless trees contrast greatly with the shaking, threatening trees that Shadrack imagines as he leaves the compound at the beginning of Sula.

Morrison's inclusion of L as narrator in this most recent novel is important because she becomes the character most in tune with nature and its almighty power over human beings. In the scene in which L speaks to human fallibility, she hints that people not only suffer from false notions of sex, failing to realize it to be merely "the clown of love", but also place too much faith in mortal reasoning (L 63). For instance, children savor raindrops in their mouths, "expecting (them) to be cold but they're not, they are warm" (L 63). L implies that it is only the storm, a personified monumental member of being, who is able to monitor the temperature of the rain.

Similarly, lightning is a living force that strikes down with "silver veins" according to L (L 64). Trees once again gain a human-like identity in this particular passage as palms "pretend to be shocked by the wind" (L 64). L has the utmost confidence that while humans imagine themselves in charge, it is nature in human-like, tangible form that directs the way the world works. It is fascinating to consider this point of view because L herself is removed from humankind, a ghost narrator whose prophetic, lyrical words are set in italics in order that her viewpoint may be differentiated from the engaged world. Not only does Morrison emphasize L's powerful narratorial role, she entitles her work "Love" in order to honor L's lofty position as key commentator on

nature as well as affection and its hold on human relationships. Morrison makes a biblical reference to First Corinthians chapter 13 as she implies that one must "abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love".[6] L reflects, "if your name is the subject of First Corinthians, chapter 13, it's natural to make it your business" (L 199). She is the only character who is fully aware and reflects upon the shades of love that color the relationships between Mr. Cosey and his wife Julia, Mr. Cosey and Celestial, Heed and Christine, May and Christine and Junior and her imagined benefactor, her simultaneously good bad man and bad good man (L 200).

In Sula, both Nel and Sula awaken to sexuality in the forest as they stretch out on the grass caught in the grips of a hungry wind. Twigs in particular become personified as male bodies being slowly stripped to a "smooth, creamy innocence" (S 58). When each of the girl's twigs are "undressed", Nel and Sula begin to "impatiently...poke" the twigs continuously into the supple soil (S 58). As their stick delves into the ground, Nel and Sula experience sexual intercourse for the first time. Their bodies are beginning to mature and desire, consequently the twigs themselves transform into male figures that stimulate their sexual curiosity and longing. An orgasmic climax seems to be reached as Nel digs deeper and deeper and the pressure causes her "male" twig to break (S 58). In this natural setting, earth objects take on male characteristics in order to help these two young women reach a new level of self-discovery and pleasure.

In an interesting twist on personifying nature, Morrison also consciously tropes humans as either naturalized objects or animals. Similar to her use of personification as a literary device, she strives to merge the natural world with the humanized world to show

[6] 1 Corinthians, 13. 13 New Revised Standard Version.

that these two realms merge without much clear distinction. In Love, Mr. Cosey's lover Celestial seems to emerge from the depths of the sea like a mermaid after wading out into the depths of the water (L 106). She arcs through the air in a graceful dive and stays under water for a prolonged amount of time (L 106). Surfacing after the dive, she seems to almost have the ability to blend sea and sky as her hair takes "on the shape of the clouds dragging the moon" (L 106). Her mere name implies that she is related to the cosmic world in some way.

Throughout this novel, Celestial is associated with the waves and the sky. She takes on the identity of a sort of nature goddess who seems to be naturally wedded to the dominant male character, Bill Cosey. As will soon be discussed, the ocean, which is figuratively embodied in his character of Mr. Cosey, represents an omnipotent water god through L's eyes.

The character Heed is also compared to various different natural images. Interestingly enough, her misshapen hands point to the devastating effects the cannery would have had on her body if she had been subjected to such labor. They are referred to as both "wings" (L 99) and "fins" (L 127). These particular animal descriptions hint at how thwarted and both mentally and psychologically disfigured Heed has become over the years due to Mr. Cosey's perverse fetish for her as a young girl. Although Mr. Cosey can be seen as the antagonist that transformed an innocent eleven-year old Heed with a "chest smooth as a plank" into a child bride, she herself is left to live with the consequences, marked with slightly monstrous attributes (L 148).

Heed has a trusted "able-bodied spider", a secretive assistant who helps her with everyday routines, Junior (L 169). Junior is also referred to as Romen's "gorgeous pet"

ready for sexual whipping (L 155). Just as Heed is marked by misshapen hands, Junior suffers from mangled toes due to her childhood accident when the uncles ran over her foot. She wears knee-high black boots to disguise her deformity, but Romen eventually catches a glimpse of what appears to be an animal-like "hoof" when she strips down during a sexual spree (L 154). Romen believes the "hoof" adds a new, desirable dimension to their primal sex life and when they later take a bath together, he lifts Junior's webbed foot above the water to lovingly lick each crushed toe. As will later be elaborately discussed in connection with Heed, soothing tub water such as this, in Love, evokes gentle sexual feelings within those who bathe.

Just as the name "Celestial" has nature-oriented connotations, Heed is often referred to as "Heed the Night" (L 191). Although the "t" in "the" is not capitalized, we may wonder if Heed acts as an appositive, a metaphor for the night sky. In an alternative syntactic pun, "Heed" acts as an imperative verb- commanding close attention to a capitalized "Night". Either way, a message of foreboding is conveyed. Whether this name refers to skin color or Heed's shadowy fate of sexual abuse and death remains up to reader interpretation.

Towards the end of the novel, L refers to both Heed and Christine as "quarreling she-crabs" within a barrel who have turned Mr. Cosey's life into an incessant nightmare (L 201). Morrison's crab metaphor is well-chosen for several reasons. First of all, as I will later discuss, this entire novel revolves around haunting ocean imagery- ferocious waves, promising shells and disguising, shifting sands. Heed and Christine participate in this natural, coastal world as loving, unified, playful children. Yet, as adults, these two women bicker and claw at one another like battling crustaceans. They have been placed

in a narrow barrel, Mr. Cosey's domain, where each of them have been trapped and damaged by his pedophilic behavior. They scramble to free themselves from this snare, their feelings of guilt and disgust that remain acute even years after Bill's death, by blaming one another for the sad fate of their lives. Yet, akin to she-crabs imprisoned at the bottom of a barrel, they cannot escape doom because they are unable to change the indelible hurt that Bill, Heed's husband and Christine's grandfather, caused them.

Christine's mother May also deprived these two girls/young adults of their freedom and can also be deemed a belligerent "she-crab". She purposely dissuaded these girls from playing together in their youth because she recognized Heed to be the enemy. She sent Christine away from the Cosey household at a young age so she would no longer associate with her child bride friend.

L is the voice and embodiment of the deepest natural connections. She seems to be born a child of the rain, baptized by its caresses. As the text reads, she was delivered "in a downpour" and "going from womb water straight into rain water marked" her (L 64). As evident in her narration, she has a tenderness for water because it caressingly cleansed and welcomed her at birth (L 64). She first understands love when she associates seawater with precious memories as well because it was within the ocean that she first spotted Mr. Cosey compassionately holding his first wife, Julia. Water, although a seemingly disconnected part of the human experience, is a very important symbol of affection and warmth for L in this novel.

Like Christine, Heed, Junior, May and L in Morrison's latest novel, the characters of Nel and Sula as well as the sexually aroused men at Edna Finch's Mellow House Ice Cream Parlor are all transformed into either animalized or naturalized beings in Sula.

Morrison uses this descriptive technique to once again create an almost obscure union between nature and humankind, and to highlight the primal instincts that people possess. As Nel and Sula stroll pass the ice cream parlor in curve licking dresses one summer day, they fall victim to the preying "panther eyes" of men who salivate over their gorgeous bodies (S 50). One man, Ajax, who later dates Sula, calls out "pig meat" in his desire to taste and relish each of these budding girls (S 50). Although this inferred cannibalization of two adolescent girls could be potentially degrading, Morrison uses language to paint the joy it brings to Nel and Sula. They must cover "their eyes lest someone see their delight" (S 50). Their succulent, fresh "meat" should be appreciated and savored. Primal instincts are affirmed and celebrated.

The men view the girls as representations of delicious pig meat while the girls endow the men with primal identities. Each saunter of Nel and Sula's hips brings about "inchworm smiles" and "squatting haunches" on the part of the pleased men (S 50). The slightest trip off their tightrope could send these two girls falling right into the laps of these male predators, yet Nel and Sula seem thrilled by the possibility. They are acrobats performing for the pleasure of Ajax and his friends.

Sula is deemed special and different by a naturalized birthmark that reaches from one eyelid all the way up to her brow. This mysterious mark has multiple meanings for Morrison compares it to a "stemmed rose" (S 52), a "copperhead" (S 103) and a "rattlesnake" (S 104) at various points during the novel. The birthmark is deemed a "stemmed rose" when Morrison is first describing Sula's maturing physical characteristics. Therefore, the reader recognizes the budding rose to be a symbol of the positive growth that Sula is beginning to experience in her early adolescence. Jude

recognizes Sula's scar in her adulthood. After observing that she seems to be a "lot of lip" woman, he concludes that this "copperhead"/ "rattlehead" above her eye attests to her "stinging", saucy nature (S 104). Morrison relays that the "blue-blade" scar darkens with age, implying that it grows more distinctive the closer she comes to committing a heartless deed (sleeping with Jude for example) (S 52).

The most poetic nature/character union to note in this novel is the merging of Ajax with jewels and fertile soil, and Sula with a towering Georgia Pine Tree. Ajax strikes a thrilling sexual cord within Sula during her adult years and becomes a highly treasured possession (S 131). In order to show the extent to which this main character values both Ajax's body and his desire for her, Morrison literally depicts him as embodying layers of chamois, gold, alabaster and loam from Sula's point of view (S 130). As Ajax and Sula have sex, Sula feels empowered enough to imaginatively fashion her partner into whatever she most longs for. She mentally peels away the blackness of Ajax's face and digs past the chamois in order to grab at tangible, glistening gold (S 130). She has the power to cut deeper into tough alabaster, and chisel further until finally striking luscious, moist loam (S 131).

Sula is elated at her discovery of loam because she can now recognize herself to be Ajax's sole giver of life and growth. She can be his water and his sun. Morrison's use of soil is very poignant because by alluding to its richness she can comment on the extreme intimacy between Ajax and Sula. What can be more intimate then touching and sifting through the bed of dirt where a person's body, heart and soul stems from? Although Sula fantasizes about Ajax's supple soil, she also worries that the affection she

is bestowing upon him, her "water", will be overbearing and turn precious loam into unyielding mud. She must be a careful provider.

Not only is Sula the sexual planter within Ajax's soil, she is the "Georgia Pine" that grounds itself within this earth. Just as she gives Ajax life by watering his loam, he provides the sustenance that is needed for her to reach new levels of sexual passion and heightened intimacy with a male human being. This passage is striking, because although Ajax is seen as the fundamental soil that nurtures his lover's growth, Sula is the "towering" pine in charge of the sexual escapade taking place. She is "high above" a submissive Ajax who is being rocked and swayed by the movements of her branches (S 129). His pleasure relies on her movements.

Most of the nature imagery that I have discussed from both Love and Sula acts to infuse more stereotypically masculine characteristics, such as power, into female characters and more stereotypic female-oriented characteristics, like soft submissiveness, into male characters. Celestial seems to drag the moon with her cloud-like hair (L 106). With just one step, she appears to control movements in the sky. L also gains elemental power from the nature imagery bestowed upon her. The rainwater that helps deliver her and greet her at birth seems to purify her before she is even able to make her first cry. She survives a difficult birth in the midst of a torrent of wind and lightening, and admits that because of these circumstances, storms embolden and intrigue her while they might frighten and overpower other bystanders (L 64).

Morrison's reference to Christine, Heed and May as "she-crabs" is a bit harder to decipher in terms of its relation to the technique of stereotypical masculinization being discussed. Conjuring up images of these women scrambling helplessly at the bottom of

Mr. Cosey's metaphorical fishing barrel does not speak to positive self-empowerment. However, it does illustrate a form of aggression that is usually associated with masculinity. Each of these female characters violently claw at each other in an attempt to inflict destruction. Heed sets fire to Christine's bed, yearning for a kill. Christine steals twelve diamond rings from Heed to prove that she has entitlement to inherit the Cosey Resort (L 20). Morrison describes the ceaseless fights that these two estranged women have in their adulthood. The confrontations involved "bruising...with hands, feet, teeth and soaring objects. One-perhaps twice- a year, they punched, grabbed hair, wrestled, bit, slapped" (L 73).

May is identified as one of the main culprits, besides Mr. Cosey, responsible for the cleft of animosity between Heed and Christine. From the moment Heed is married, she plants seeds of resentment, disgust and hatred within her daughter Christine (L 76). As the text reads, "...she did everything to separate the two when they were little girls... the intruder (Heed) was a snake: penetrating, undermining, sullying, devouring" (L 99). May's influence on Christine is abusive, as she further sullies these two girls' relationships based on her own anger at Mr. Cosey's choice of a young bride. May is the crab who has accommodated the fall into a spiraling barrel of hatred. Therefore, by using crustacean imagery to express sentiments of violence and aggression, Morrison is endowing these female characters with forms of stereotypical masculinity such as disruptive agency.

In contrast, the "beautiful" character Tar Baby, found in Morrison's earlier work, is feminized when reference is made to his "cornsilk" hair (S 40). Instead of imagining a strapping fellow, the reader conjures up an image of a "slight" innocent young man with

delicate, baby soft hair (39). Tar Baby has a degraded feminized role as a passive drunk, and yet the women cherish this man who sings with "the sweetest hill voice imaginable" at Wednesday night prayer meetings (S 40).

In contrast, Nel and Sula are masculinized and empowered when they are paradoxically honored as "pig meat". Although the men seem to objectify them with this phrase, it is not derogatory in the particular scene at Edna Finch's Mellow House Ice Cream Parlor. These two girls hold the men's attention from the minute they strut by. Although the "panther eyes" seem to burn through Nel and Sula's dresses, they cannot penetrate because the girls keep their distance. They refuse to fall victim to lust and lose their "balance" as "tight rope walkers" within a spotlight of admiration (S 51). This example of women holding the sexual reins confounds the stereotype of men as dominators within the erotic realm. With each hip swagger, they shatter the stereotype that men are more sexually charged than women.

Although gender bending occurs as stereotypes about both masculinity and femininity are altered when Morrison tropes human beings as naturalized objects and animals, the personified ocean in Love is given a clear male identity. This body of water is an integral part of nature and an equally crucial physical and metaphorical image. In an interview with Toni Morrison, novelist Diane Mckinney-Whetstone starts her talk by relaying to the listener that imagining the ocean setting of this work is essential to the process of immersing oneself within the events that take place. She claims, "Morrison locates us so sensually in the book's coastal setting that we actually feel the mist rise up from the sea as we become absorbed in the lives of the women...".[7] Without smelling,

[7] Diane McKinney-Whetstone, "The Nature of Love," Essence, October 2003, 206.

feeling and sensing the sea the reader would remain distanced from both the landscape and the affect it has on especially L, Heed and Christine. The ocean represents both people and emotion to these girls/women. First, it seems to embody man- a sexualized, domineering Mr. Cosey in particular.

Toward the middle of L's narration, she confides in the reader "the ocean is her man now" because "he knows when to rear and hump his back and when to be quiet and simply watch a woman" (L 100). She infuses the ocean with sexuality, and deems him to be devious yet horribly pain-stricken as well (L 100). Presenting these descriptions carefully, L directly equates the treasured yet turbulent waters with the character of Mr. Cosey.

One of the main reasons the ocean evokes an image of Mr. Cosey for L is because her first memory of observing him was when she was five and he was tenderly helping his first wife Julia ride the waves near the shore (L 64). Yet, her comparison does not simply stem from a single memory association. L comments that Mr. Cosey's heart is so "wide" and vast like the sea that he "could care…for a wife and have so much room left over" (L 100). She explains that once Julia died, he invested all of his tenderness into his son Billy Boy (L 100). According to L, Mr. Cosey is akin to the ocean because he is nurturing and his affection for these two members of his family remains constant, like the ever- undulating waves.

Just as it is difficult, yet possible, to fathom the depths of murky, creature-infested seawater, L attests that over time she becomes able to comprehend Mr. Cosey and his actions. Through close observation, she was able to recognize how Billy Boy flourished and "splashed" in the sea of both duty and lavish attention that his father bestowed upon

him (L 101). Although it is not clearly specified, the reader identifies Mr. Cosey to be devious after reading that this so-called benefactor robs Heed of her innocence and youthfulness by taking her hand in marriage at the age 13. He is pain-stricken due to the loss of Julia when their passion for each other is at its prime (L 100).

This image of Mr. Cosey as the embodiment of the ocean is most important to L, because it allows her to be close to him at all times. She can observe the ocean waters and feel his presence. She relates, "I can watch my man from the porch. In the evening mostly, but sunrise too, when I need to see his shoulders collared with seafoam" (L 106). She is drawn in by the rhythmic waves of his sexuality, his tenderness and his love.

Just as L treasures the ocean for its male-like qualities, Heed cherishes bath water because it reminds her of her childhood days of soaking in the sea and her most pure sexual experience. For her, lapping water evokes feelings of sensuality. She takes baths quite often and relies on a "practiced use of her thumbs" to grip the tub's rim so that she may slide down into bubbly bliss (L 71). Heed continues to bathe in her old age when she can barely get out of the porcelain tub without slipping because she can't bear

> the loss of skin memory, the body's recollection of pleasure. Of her wedding night, for instance, submerged in water in his arms...Undressing. No penetration. No blood. No eeks of pain or discomfort. Just this man stroking, nursing, bathing her. She arched...opened her legs to the surf. Skin might forget that...Heed's own story was dyed in colors restored to their original clarity in...water (L 78).

As a girl forced to marry an older man at a very young age, Heed relies on the ocean's gentle touch to make her first male, sexual experience bearable. The water makes it even enjoyable. In a sense, the flowing water de-virginizes her as Mr. Cosey holds her steady in his arms. There is none of the pain or dirtiness in this water- soaking, wedding night scene as comes about later when Mr. Cosey has intercourse with her. By

the end of her life, Heed recalls the ocean as her most responsive and thrilling lover when she submerges herself in bath water.

The ocean is also a soothing, supportive friend to Mr. Cosey himself. The reader discovers that the only time this central character is able to open up his heart and share his feelings is when he is out on the open seas, fishing and reminiscing about his life and his love interests. For instance, he never spends time with one of the most reliable men who works for him, Sandler Gibbons, except for certain occasions when he invites Mr. Gibbons to join him on a daylong fishing expedition. Mr. Cosey is only able to warm up to this man when he is sailing on the open seas, out of sight and out of reach from the rest of the socially delineated world. The fishing boat seems to be a licensed place to Mr. Cosey where hierarchy is suspended.

In general, the ocean provides an escape route away from the tense atmosphere of the Cosey household. While bobbing peacefully on the waves, Mr. Cosey is able to ask the perturbing questions that grate on his mind and soul and lend his eyes a "cracked" look (L 42). Mellowed by his drink, he asks, "What do they (all the Cosey household members) say about me?" (L 42). In a way, the water realm seems to wash away Cosey's false façade of both confidence and happiness, and allows him to honestly express his doubts and ponder his imperfections. Seeing him as just a small, sorrowful speck braving the endless sea, the reader truly recognizes Mr. Cosey to be a tormented individual at this moment. Like the ocean wave, at first glance he seems to ride peacefully and steadily throughout life. Yet, in reality, he experiences tumultuous feelings as well. His drinking problem is an indicator of such problems.

Just as the water seems to offer the character of Mr. Cosey a getaway from both social and emotional reality, it offers Toni Morrison herself entrance into the realm of writing. In an article found in the New Yorker entitled *Ghosts in the House,* Hilton Als describes how Morrison seeks out her converted boathouse overlooking the Hudson River in Rockland County in order to find inspiration for her writing.[8] Als implies that the calm waters help her to think lucidly so that her words may flow easily onto the page. A decade ago, the original boathouse that harbored her thoughts and facilitated her writing burned to the ground (62). However, Morrison cherishes this beautiful river spot so much that she did not want to move her workplace elsewhere.

Despite the positive images of the treasured sea in this novel and of the Hudson River within Morrison's own life, Love is filled with allusions to the torment and tragedy that tumultuous waters introduce. Although Bill Cosey seems to be both a heroic man of the sea for L and a dangerous man of the sea for Heed, the supposedly male Police-heads that lord over the ocean in this novel are unequivocally negative forces of "outside evil" (L 5). In the opening section of the novel, L claims that these "dirty…creatures" would "shoot out of the ocean to harm loose women and eat disobedient children" (L 5). L suggests that the Police-heads punish one adulterous woman, who has lain with a neighbor's husband, by causing her to have a stroke (L 5). She also suspects that these meddlesome aggressors dig up another women's property deed (another reference in the novel hints that this woman could have been May) and relish in the deaths of two children who swim past a set of safety ropes and tragically drown (L 5). The Police-

[8] Hilton Als, "Ghosts in the House," New Yorker, 27 October 2003, 62.

heads are also the main culprits in the death of a bride, after her suspected honeymoon frolic with a random man (L 6).

In all of these instances, these mysterious hat- sporting destroyers seem to be punitive enforcers of morality and justice. They mean to teach wayward women and children a brutal lesson, but they leave no opportunities for forgiveness. The Police-heads are merciless "demons" of the ocean that haunt the seas, ready "to pounce around sunset" and rear their ugly "gate-mouthed profiles" at sinful surfers (L 5). The Police-heads have complete control over their territory of waves. They are sea gods who ironically use their "policing" powers to inflict pain rather than facilitate reform.

Just as the Police-heads serve to disturb, midway through the novel, the reader is equally troubled by ocean imagery. Christine speaks to her rocky, young adulthood years when she was banned from living at the Cosey residence. She claims that during this time she "was as lonely as a twelve-year-old watching waves suck away her sand castle" (L 91). This image is strikingly disturbing to the reader. It hints at both Christine and Heed's childhood when their innocent creations were destroyed by Mr. Cosey's raging waves of sexual desire. In a few pages, I will discuss how the sand castle is not only an emblem of child's play and youthfulness, it is a representation of the carefully constructed, yet precarious relationship that is crafted between Heed and Christine as young girls.

The "sucking" wave imagery in Christine's memory has power as well as sexual connotations. As eager yet naïve twelve year olds, Heed and Christine have little control over the primitive castle of friendship they are creating. Although they lovingly build each wall with the intention that it will remain sturdy, the obliterating force of the water's

pull is much stronger than they imagine. They are at the age when adults, who represent this forceful water, control their actions and behaviors. Therefore, when Mr. Cosey touches Heed's nipple, she has to trust that his older, "wiser" instincts are correct (L 191). However, the "sucking" waves that snatch away these girl's dreams, and their strengthening friendship, are not just Bill Cosey's interferences.

As discussed earlier, May's damage is also associated with these threatening waves, as she works to wipe out the bond that exists between Nel and Sula with one precise blow. Christine, in particular, is corrupted by May's hatred for Heed because her mother is her main nurturer, provider and teacher.

In another passage on page 23, "sucking" wave imagery allures the reader and Christine alike because waves are described as bearers of brilliant yet blinding beauty. One admires the "glittery" wave crests that seem to embody some form of tangible treasure. "The sucking waves reached out from water so blue you had to turn away lest it hurt your eyes" (L 23). Once again, this contrast between gorgeous, glorious water and the piercing pain it brings to the viewer is fascinating. The ocean draws both Morrison's characters and readers in, yet quickly pushes them aside with equal force.

Similarly, although Heed revels in the sexual bliss that water evokes within her as it smoothly slides over her skin, she is also repulsed by certain aspects of the ocean. For instance, she has an abhorrence for shellfish. When Junior first arrives at One Monarch Street, Christine is preparing a lavish shrimp meal for Heed, one she knows will disgust her enemy (L 24). Whether conscious of it or not, the ocean represents loss for Heed in some deep sense. The beach was her playground until Mr. Cosey and May decided to

perversely knock down her castle as well as Christine's. Shellfish also evoke imagined images of horrid cannery work, work that Heed would never agree to submit herself to.

In an earlier passage, Junior speaks to Heed with youthful exuberance when she makes her acquaintance the first time at the Cosey residence. Junior explains that she will be able to complete any task that Heed asks of her. Junior's playful yet confident wink after she pledges allegiance to Heed startles this older woman greatly. It invokes "a momentary recall of something just out of reach, like a shell snatched away by a wave" (L 27).

Although this phrase seems inconsequential and can easily be glossed over, it has symbolic significance. For a split second, Heed is conscious of her envy for Junior- an independent, assertive, ambitious girl seeking a job. Heed herself never experienced the perks of being young and audacious. She was never able to secure a future for herself like Junior because she was "snatched" up by a man. Her own "shell" of possibility "sucked" away by Mr. Cosey's powerful waves. A poignant moment of this novel is when Heed's brief recognition of this loss causes her to physically double over from a "flick of melancholy" and she leans toward Junior in an act of both admiration and desperation (L 27). Junior is able to exploit her youthful vigor in a way that Heed never could.

Just as the ocean seems to empower Celestial by infusing her with the supernatural ability to drag the moon and clouds across the sky as she emerges from the underwater world, it also becomes her victimizer in a way because the hook that snags her cheek is borne in by the water. I have extrapolated that it is indeed Celestial who suffers from this fishing accident although Morrison does not explicitly state that it is she

who becomes the victim. I am able to identify Celestial as the girl being attacked because she is said later to carry an elongated mark on her cheek. As the text states, "Her face was cut from cheek to ear. A fine scar like a pencil mark an eraser could turn into a flawless face" (L 188). Such a mark could be produced by the thin, sharp point of a hook.

Celestial experiences a form of vulnerability within the water because it is only while swimming close to shore that she is subject to the ensnarement of a cultural object that pollutes the natural sea. She is snagged by a fish hook at the age of just nine or ten as she dares to swim close to the shoreline (L 101). Although she is breathtakingly beautiful, the hook mark on her cheek remains prominent for the rest of her life. The ocean represents danger and hurt in this example. Even though waves characteristically wash away dirt and cleanse the sands on the shore, they act to trap Celestial like they would a fish who cannot ride away fast enough to avoid the fisherman's lure. They are not strong enough to cleanse her cheek, as blood streams down her face in rivulets from the hook wound (L 101).

As mentioned earlier, the sea clearly seems to represent the impositions that Mr. Cosey places upon a young, defenseless Heed. In particular, Morrison defines the ocean as the marriage between Mr. Cosey and Heed. This author uses striking imagery when describing underwater life to allude to the wedding ceremony that seems to be one of the focal points of this novel. The text reads, "And then there was the sea. Fishermen say there is life down there that looks like wedding veils and ropes of gold with ruby eyes" (L 105). On the surface, it is lovely to equate darting, transparent fish with veil imagery. However, the wedding veil placed a top Heed welcomed a premature future with a man

she did not love or desire. "Veiled" sea life therefore has a negative, foreboding connotation in this passage.

Although "ropes of gold with ruby eyes" is not directly related to wedding imagery, it presents the reader with another conflicting message about the ocean; sea-life in particular. The reader revels in the "gold" treasure-like appearance of whatever sea creature or plant being imagined. I immediately envision a golden squid with lengthy, strong arms. Yet, however beautiful this squid may seem, I cannot overlook its ability to squeeze life out of another creature when it ropes a victim with its bejeweled, suctioning tentacles. The squid's countless eyes may seem to glisten like precious rubies, yet its victim cannot avoid its probing gaze. Once again, Morrison invites both the reader and the characters in the novel to take part in a struggle. They must covet and cast away the jewels of the sea simultaneously.

In Sula, water imagery is not treasured, only feared and resented. Whereas the ocean in Love is multi-layered as it evokes feelings of both pleasure and pain, the river in The Bottom can be equated only with tragedy because of the death it witnesses and assists. On one lazy summer day, Nel and Sula decide to playfully taunt a boy, Chicken Little, who runs up the bank in over-sized knickers (S 59). The two girls boldly dare Chicken to climb up a monstrous beech tree, and Sula decides to accompany him for he is too frightened to grasp on to the first branch. As they reach the top, Chicken laughs with delight as he soars above the rest of the seemingly miniscule landscape and glimpses the other side of the river for the first time. As in Love, Morrison establishes a close relationship between her characters and their childhood command of the natural realm in

this scene. However, after Chicken dismounts the wondrous tree, he is promptly greeted with his greatest foe, the river (S 61).

After Sula encourages Chicken to leave the beloved tree, she rewards him by whirling him around in mid-air so that he may experience the thrill of flying. Chicken's dreadful fate is sealed as Sula accidentally lets loose his little palms and he plummets into the river. As Morrison succinctly describes, "the water darkened and closed quickly over the place where (he sank)" (S 61). The river instantaneously becomes Chicken's grave and leaves no room for second chances' for either the boy or the two girls. The rippling water seems cruelly resolute as it resumes its "peaceful" composure after the horrendous swallow (S 61). Although Morrison does not explicitly personify the river in this novel as she does in her later work, it is almost endowed with human-like characteristics. This is understood as Nel and Sula trust the waters to keep Chicken's accidental death a secret from everyone except the one suspected bystander- Shadrack.

In her essay entitled "Sula: Within and Beyond the African American Folk Tradition", Trudier Harris astutely asserts that the enclosing river not only secures the physical death of Chicken Little, it causes emotional disturbance and death within the best friend culprits as well. She observes, "water that should cleanse and purify instead leads to a clogging of human emotions, a beaver's dam on the souls of the two girls".[9] Harris goes on to describe the differences between the two blockages that this water death evokes within Nel and Sula. Nel's blockage takes the form of an imagined, invincible friendship bond. After witnessing Chicken Little's unforgettable drowning, she takes for

[9] Trudier Harris, "Sula: Within and Beyond the African American Folk Tradition," in Modern Critical Interpretations: Sula, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1999), 130.

granted that what they have seen will draw them together in an unbreakable bond of faithful friendship.

In contrast, Harris believes that Sula's blockage takes the form of "emotional constipation...the form of not caring enough about people to be truly interested in them".[10] Not only does Sula emotionally distance herself from Chicken after the funeral, innocently trotting down the street hand in hand with Nel like she would do on any other summer day, she begins to distance herself from her best friend in a way. This disconnect becomes bolder as she sleeps with Jude. Harris explains that Sula's mentality after the river episode actually allows her to create the difference between herself and Nel. She honestly believes that "if they could keep a secret as dark as Chicken Little's death and survive, then they should be able to survive the presumed infidelity with Jude".[11]

The reference to tub water in Sula does not mirror the erotic bath scenes found in Love. Whereas the sensual water in this latter novel brings sexual relief to a lonely, craving woman, the tub water in the early work is endowed with little if any healing power. After Sula's mother, Hannah, stoops to light a yard fire, the flames leap up and consume her (S 75). As the fire quickly ravages her skin, she runs around the lawn in helpless agony. Neighbors Mr. and Mrs. Suggs, who are coincidentally outside canning, lift their tub filled with water and blood red tomatoes, and throw all of its contents at "the smoke-and-flame-bound woman" (S 76). Although this liquid does put out the flames, it is too late, for too much damage has been done. In actuality, the surge of water does not

[10] Harris, 130.
[11] Harris, 131.

cool or salve Hannah's sweltering flesh. The steam ironically causes the sizzling to escalate and increasingly deprives Hannah of needed oxygen (S 76).

Just as the river water is not able to rescue Chicken Little from death and even seems to be somewhat of an accomplice, the tub water hardly remedies Hannah's burning body. In fact, the cascade of red-tinted tomato water seems to bring this miserable woman to a new level of suffering. Harris notes that water is a "portent of evil" in this scene not only through the medium of tub water, but through the medium of weather as well. Rain is predicted to fall at the time of Hannah's death.[12] If this occurrence had taken place, the fire would have never have been lit. However, nature seems to be the harbinger of Hannah's death as the wind takes a dangerous shift and "the expected rain turns into the fire of Hannah's burning, not the release of cooling water".[13]

Therefore, water seems to be more of a foe than a cherished savior or friend to Chicken Little and Hannah Peace. The main difference between this natural water as foe and the antagonist in Love, is that the latter antagonist, Mr. Cosey, is named. In Sula, the water foe has a mysterious, more abstract identity. It seems to be working against human progression and healing. Interestingly enough, the tomato red water that represents further suffering in this scene is reminiscent of the red water that Eva drinks right before she fatally "baptizes" Plum in a burning blaze. As she sits on Plum's bed rocking him in a final embrace, she reaches for what she believes to be strawberry crush (S 47). Eva sputters with disgust as she realizes it is nothing more than "blood-tainted water" (S 47). As she glares at the tinted water, the shame she feels for her son reaches a new level and she quickly sets fire to his bed (S 47).

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[12] Harris, 120.
[13] Harris, 129.

Within her article, "The Contemporary Fables of Toni Morrison", Barbara Christian goes as far as to state that death, Sula's death in particular, symbolizes a 'sleep of water always'.[14] Not only is Chicken Little eternally enveloped by the river, Sula's funeral is concluded with a rain shower.[15] The collapse of the community tunnel in 1941 takes place because there is a sudden change from cold weather to blistering heat.[16] This structure tumbles as the temperature transformation causes the earth to tremble and the river to overflow.[17]

Throughout this paper I have been describing how Morrison both humanizes nature through personification in Love and Sula and conversely "naturalizes" characters by troping them as animals or water. As I hinted early, she also succeeds in "naturalizing" the bond of complicated friendship between Heed and Christine as she compares it to a sand castle structure. Interestingly enough, the primitive relationship between these two girls seems to be nearly identical to the rapport between Nel and Sula.

Nel and Sula befriend one another at a young age. Their attraction to one another seems primal because it is instinctive. Children naturally seek playmates or fabricate companionship by creating imaginary friends. When these two girls first meet each other at the age of twelve, Morrison describes them to be "unshaped, formless things" (S 53). Consequently, they are only able to mold their identities by finding and using "each other to grow on" (S 52). In this respect, their friendship seems to be a "natural" force of law. They are not even aware that as part of their maturing process, they rely on one another to

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[14] Barbara Christian, "The Contemporary Fables of Toni Morrison," in Modern Critical Interpretations: Sula, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1999), 37.
[15] Christian, 37.
[16] Christian, 37.
[17] Christian, 37.

learn about their individual personality differences. As the text relates, "Nel seemed stronger and more consistent than Sula, who could hardly be counted on to sustain any emotion for more than three minutes" (S 53). Their love is "naturalized" because they don't feel the need to work or fashion the intimate relationship. They are too young to even realize that human interaction takes effort. They are unconsciously within each other's thoughts even as they dream at night.

Each girl's desire to further separate herself from an already "distant" mother is also elemental. As Nel relates, she has an acute desire to differentiate herself from her mother and cultivate her own identity, one that Helene might not necessarily stamp with approval, because she is ashamed of her (S 28). Nel's stomach twists in a sickening knot when she remembers how her mother flaunted her custard skin and carelessly threw a smile at a white train conductor in order to pardon her presence in a white train coach (S 20). Nel never wants to have to explain or justify her color to anyone.

When Nel returns home she looks into the mirror and makes the same thrilling discovery Shadrack made in his prison cell. A "shiver" of excitement runs through her as she stares at her reflection, her nose that is so unlike her mothers, and celebrates her gorgeous Black uniqueness. She capitalizes on her individuality as she whispers, "I'm me. Me. I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me" (S 28). Each me-ness affirmation Nel makes empowers her.

Once again, Morrison relies on nature imagery in this scene to support the message that she is conveying to the reader. She wants the reader to recognize that self-acceptance and affirmation can be positively transformative. When Nel continues to murmur "me" with passion and pleasure, she looks out the window and is struck by the

"dark leaves of the horse chestnut" (S 28). She is able to enjoy her view of the stirring, deeply rich colored leaves because she has a new sense of pride in her own beautifully blaring Blackness. As she continues to stare intently at the tree, she sinks deeper into a state of bliss, recognizing how "wonderful" her me-ness really is.

This horse chestnut matches Nel in color and its strength reminds her of her own individual, powerful agency, separate from her mother's soft custard courage. In this scene, the reader has yet another chance to reflect upon the empowering abilities that the majority of the trees present in Love and Sula bestow upon Morrison's characters. In Love, an assortment of trees protect Junior in the forest and allow her to seek shelter from the uncles. The beech tree near the river in Sula allows Chicken Little to climb higher above the world than he ever has before. After cherishing the image in the mirror, Nel is able to befriend Sula because she is more comfortable with her own personality and she has a better definition of self-worth. She chooses to discover more than just the limiting idea that her mother has fed her, that "freedom and triumph (is) forbidden to her", by befriending Sula (S 52). With Sula, a girl her mother regards with "curdled scorn", Nel unconsciously decides to "set about creating something else to be"- a daring, exciting bond with another Black girl where pride is paramount (S 52).

Nel and Sula have a basic instinct to protect one another as well. When they are approached by four bully some white boys one day after school, Sula pulls out a knife and cuts her own forefinger to scare them away (S 54). Her desire to keep both herself and Nel free from harm is so innate and primal that she is willing to cut off the tip of her finger without a flinch. "Her aim was determined but inaccurate. She slashed off only the tip of her finger. The four boys stared open-mouthed at the wound and the scrap of

flesh, like a button mushroom, curling in the cherry blood that ran into the corners of the slate" (S 54).

In a fascinating manner, Morrison compares the cut up flesh to a natural vegetable- a button mushroom (S 54). The blood that gushes from her wound is also naturalized- the flavor and color of red, ripe cherry (S 54). It is as if Morrison is implying that as tasty and tempting as a mushroom fingertip oozing cherry- colored blood may be to the boys, Sula is able to resist their taunts because she has the support of Nel. "Cherry" is a sexual term usually used in reference to a girl's hymen. Sula's resistance to the boy's aggression can therefore be seen as a metaphor for sexual reluctance of a sort of exploitation. However, she has to wound herself to prevent the boys from taking advantage of her.

Although the burgeoning of Christine and Heed's relationship as young girls is not detailed, their friendship arises out of the same desire to discover intimacy and understanding away from their mothers. Just as Nel's mother Helene initially spurns her daughter's lower-class playmate, Christine's mother May resents Heed's lower-class presence in the Cosey residence and therefore detests her.

These two girls are drawn to one another because they feel an instant connection to one another. In Women's Review of Books, Deborah E. McDowell explains within her article entitled "Philosophy of the heart", that just as Nel and Sula merge to form 'two throats...one eye', Heed and Christine 'belong' to one another 'shar[ing] stomachache laughter, a secret language...(they) knew as they slept together that one's dreaming was the same as the other one's'.[18] The image of each of these two couples as one once again

[18] Deborah D. McDowell, "Philosophy of the heart", Women's Review of Books, December 2003, 9.

speaks to the fact that they are so fundamentally similar, their love for one another is natural; they see themselves within each other. I build upon McDowell's assertion that these friendships are intimate and unified but go on to see how Morrison likens them to a natural force.

Akin to the natural union between Heed and Christine, the schism that occurs between them at a young age is also natural because it occurs when they are still inexperienced children. They are too young to have mastered the skills needed to mend their relationship, or even to know how to pinpoint what has gone awry with their love for each other. This natural naiveté therefore seems pardonable. The reader discovers that Nel and Sula, on the other hand, are held more accountable for the break in their friendship. Sula initiates the estrangement by leaving home for college and then solidifies it by having sex with Nel's husband, Jude, doggie-style (S 105). At this point in her life, Sula has complete control over her decisions. By choosing to participate in primal sex with her best friend's husband, she is choosing to sacrifice intimacy with Nel. Yet, their relationship remains natural because Sula does not realize she's jeopardizing their mutual, instinctive love for one another. She has sex with Jude because it is pleasurable and seems appropriate at the time. Sula does not consciously choose to estrange herself from her beloved best friend.

Morrison highlights both Heed and Christine's and Nel and Sula's elemental childhood bonds by characterizing them with direct nature imagery. At the end of Love, the only way these two old, broken women are able to salvage the remnants of their youthful relationship is to reminisce about the world that brought them together. Christine begins remembering youthful picnics on the beach with nostalgia.

Did it rain? Seem to remember rain.
Fireflies. That's what I remember.
You wanted to bottle them.
You wouldn't let me.
The turtles scared us....
He took my childhood away from me, girl.
He took all of you away from me.
The sky, remember? When the sun went down?
Sand. It turned blue.
And the stars. Just a few at first.
Then so many they lit the whole...world.
Pretty. So so pretty (L 194).

By cherishing the natural and the beautiful, they can remember the exalted times during their childhood when sensing the light of a firefly, feeling a drop of refreshing rain or confronting menacing turtles seemed to be enough to draw them together harmoniously. It allows them to once again speak in primal yet precious pig latin, the secret language that comes so naturally to them both. It encourages them to continue to lapse back into the liberating salutation that comes to their lips naturally, "Hey Celestial" (L 198). Nature drew them together in awe and reverence and made everything and everyone else seem trivial. As this quote relates, the beach, the insects and the sky encapsulate their early childhood. "He", Mr. Cosey, takes all of this splendor, and the girl's capacity to appreciate this splendor, away. However, during this late stage in their lives they are finally able to try to recover their precious, youthful memories by reverting back to nature imagery. The end of this poetic dialogue seems to heal the rift between Heed and Christine. The discussion of the hue of the blue sand, the warmth of the sunset and the brilliance of the vast, glittery night sky allows them to recover. It gives them an additional opportunity to add to their patchwork of soothing nature images. These reassuring images allow the women to temporarily return to girlhood. They are able to open up and honestly discuss their traumatic childhood.

Similarly, in Sula, Nel reconciles with her best friend at the very end of the novel after finding communion with the natural world that surrounds her. Even though Sula has already passed away at this point, Nel is able to sense her powerful presence and undying love. Nel's "fur ball" of resentment bursts and dissipates "like dandelion spores in the breeze" as she senses Sula's healing breath of wind (S 174). Morrison roots the reader in the scene as she describes how "leaves stirred; mud shifted; there was the smell of over-ripe green things" (S 174). Nature instructs Nel that it has not been Jude but Sula who she has been aching for and missing for so many years. Nel does not possess this wisdom herself.

In her poignant essay entitled "Touching the Earth", bell hooks encourages Blacks to recall "the legacy of our ancestors who knew that the way we regard land and nature will determine the level of our self-regard".[19] hooks claims that this remembrance represents "a necessary dimension of healing" where one is able to see reflections of oneself and one's life within nature. Although hooks is touching upon my theoretical observation that nature acts as a tool for self-inspection within this statement, she doesn't elaborate on this crucial point nearly enough or connect it specifically to Sula. She attests that Morrison astutely reflects on the Black migratory movement that removed African Americans from the agrarian south in her novel, The Bluest Eye. hooks argues that this book illustrates how it is only by returning to the soil of their southern homeland that Blacks are able to recover their "wounded...psyches", but she does not look at tree, animal or water imagery in particular.[20]

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[19] bell hooks, "Touching the Earth" in At Home on the Earth: Becoming Native to our Place- A Multicultural Anthology, ed. David Landis Barnhill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 56.
[20] hooks, 53.

Nel relies on nature to give her the opportunity to benefit from the type of self-inspection both hooks and I support. As she regards the fur ball break apart due to the force of the wind, she understands that this mass of hairs represents the tension between herself and Sula. As the ball bursts, Nel recognizes that the stress in this female relationship must undoubtedly loosen as well because each girl's love and commitment to one another is too important to be strangled within a mass of resentment and anger. Similarly, when the leaves and mud shift positions, she is aware that a change must happen. She must embrace Sula's memory. As the "green things" wisely dictate, the time for forgiveness is "overripe" (S 174).

Although both Heed, Christine, Nel and Sula do finally reach a state where they can embrace each other in forgiveness toward the end of the novel, they are stopped short by death, a natural force. Although each of these girls basically experiences her first, good sexual awakening with her best friend within the presence of nature (Heed and Christine within the water and Sula and Nel within the grassy shade), adult heterosexual sex and what it leads to puts a damper on their relationships. When Heed becomes Mr. Cosey's premature bride, Christine loses respect for her. When Christine catches her grandfather masturbating, with his eyes closed, in her innocent childhood bedroom, she vomits out of disgust and horror (L 192). After Nel meets and marries Jude, she sacrifices the intimacy of her female friendship in exchange for the intimacy that romantic love lends her. Sula's sexual escapade with Jude, when she has primal sex while panting on all fours, wrenches Nel from within like a knife. Nel cannot fully trust her ever again.

In summary, Heed and Christine's as well as Nel and Sula's friendship is naturalized in this text because it is described as instinctive. Their love for one another is primal because it does not have to be cultivated or constructed. Like McDowell, Philip Page claims in his work entitled "Shocked into Separateness: Unresolved Oppositions in Sula", that in Nel and Sula's case, each girls affection for one another seems to be innate because "the two are nearly" fused into one being.[21] Not only is the bond created between these girls naturalized at its conception, it remains so even during and after their temporary estrangement. It remains this way because outside forces sever their trust- they themselves don't plan the split. Heed and Christine are ripped apart by Bill Cosey, an older, manipulative man. Nel and Sula also become victims of their own sexuality. Jude originally takes Nel away from Sula in matrimony but then ends up sleeping with Sula. Even though Sula commits the sin of adultery by lying with Jude, she is not aware of the unpleasant repercussions of her actions because she does not define sex with either love or intimacy. Her natural lust leads her into the heat of the moment. She does not consciously choose to wound her best friend.

Kathleen R. Wallace and Karla Armbruster speak eloquently about the importance of nature in their essay entitled, "The Novels of Toni Morrison: "Wild Wilderness Where Their Was None". They superbly and succinctly state that within her writing, "Morrison represents the perspective of nature itself...a kind of chorus' thinking and feeling and watching and responding to the action of the novel".[22] Through this description, Wallace and Armbruster insinuate that they value the natural images found in

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[21] Philip Page, "Shocked into Separateness: Unresolved Oppositions in Sula" in Modern Critical Interpretations: Sula, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1999), 189.
[22] Wallace and Armbruster, 212.

Morrison's novels, like Love and Sula, because these images become personified into human characters who think, act, feel and even look like people. Nature and humans are equally important to Morrison, so she often doesn't feel it necessary to distinguish between the two. Yet, instead of reflecting upon many of the positive similarities between nature and the characters within Morrison's novels as I have done, these critics focus mainly on how both have been oppressed. They write, "(her) body of work...suggests that her African American characters are especially likely to understand how nature is interpreted...and used because they themselves have so often been dominated...through whites' uses of nature".[23] Instead of viewing nature as an emblem of Black growth and pride as I suggest, Armbruster and Wallace view it as an ecological representation of past suffering. They leave out a discussion of Sula almost completely, merely mentioning that the Bottom is one of the natural settings the novel revolves around.[24]

I have chosen to remark upon tree, animal and water imagery in particular because it is when describing these natural resources and creatures that Morrison most clearly creates the union between the physical world and the human world. When trees boast muscled arms and sea waves rise with sexual stamina, nature seems to become more central to the text. By making nature a paramount, human-like character, Morrison helps readers discover that they can learn about themselves and about the way the world works merely by studying a branch limb or the white-capped crest of a wave.

In a 1981 interview with Toni Morrison, Charles Ruas asked this author why exactly she uses "nature spirits" in her novels.

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[23] Wallace and Armbruster, 213.
[24] Wallace and Armbruster, 226.

Charles Ruas: Then…the nature spirits that you use to structure your novels form your sense of the cosmology and of the psyche?

Toni Morrison: It's an animated world in which trees can be outraged and hurt…You have to be very still to understand these so-called signs, in addition to which they inform you about your own behavior.[25]

Although Morrison's explanation seems simplistic, it's golden. In this day and age, humankind abuses and disregards the environment more and more and is increasingly unable to realize that Mother Earth does live and breathe as well. This is problematic because she serves as a representation of ourselves. If we cannot "be…still to understand…(her) signs", we are unable to learn about our own actions and discover the reasons why we may act this or that way based on certain motivations.

Nature imagery in both Love and Sula is a familiar literary tool and Morrison uses it to prove that all of us are natural, primal beings in a very basic sense. Although we may strive to overcome sexual temptation, our starvation for pleasure may have us down on all fours lapping up kisses from our best friend's husband's lips. Morrison also uses nature imagery to turn gender stereotypes upside down. In many instances, by describing characters with natural characteristics this author can very subtly make female characters seem strong and bold and male characters appear weak and reliant.

In conclusion, I have chosen to conduct an image study and an analysis of the social construction of both gender and friendship as seen through the lens of nature. I have chosen to do a traditional close reading of nature images because in studying Morrison's intricate use of these evocative tools, the reader recognizes that she is not merely troping the natural world for aesthetic purposes. Only intense analysis reveals

[25] Ruas, 100.

that Morrison uses reoccurring nature imagery to instruct humankind as to the way it should act. When noted, studied and appreciated by the main female characters in Love and Sula, trees, water and animals reflect personal attributes and lead to self-discovery, self-affirmation and a realization of the truth.

My finding that nature often acts as a positive, instructional tool in these novels differs from critics like McDowell, hooks, Armbruster and Wallace firstly because no in-depth analysis of earth imagery in Morrison's latest novel has yet been accomplished by these literary critics. Secondly, I describe that although nature imagery can represent tumultuous human emotion, it also enlightens, provokes and heals not just the characters, but also the readers who choose to heed and merge with their natural surroundings. In general, these critics are more concerned with the connections between environmental concerns and racial rifts. They either do not see, or choose not to comment on Morrison's decision to use naturalization, in both Love and Sula, in a positive sense to deflate oppressive gender stereotypes so that female characters such as Nel, Sula, Heed, Christine, May, L, Junior and Celestial appear confident and capable.

Lastly, by using both imagination and close-reading skills, I have also theorized that certain earthen images, such as the sand castles that Heed and Christine lovingly sculpt together in Love, represent human relationships that evolve naturally. These relationships blossom early on but then temporarily wilt as both people and circumstances change. Just as trees naturally grow and ocean water consistently laps against the shoreline in ebbs and flows, these girls experience evolving companionship with all of its natural ups and downs. These two novels demand comparison because they focus on two extraordinarily rich, loving girlhood friendships that are sundered by

heterosexual unions and sexual activities, but then restored through and in revelations of death.

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